

Unveiling the Depths Within: Profound Journey of Inner Exploration and Emotional Vulnerability in Ajay K. Pandey's Novels *Everything I Never Told You* and *A Girl to Remember*

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Abstract

Inner exploration, also known as self-discovery, is a transforming journey that allows an individual to understand their emotions, thoughts, and desires. During inner exploration, an individual delves deep into their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs, thereby uncovering hidden aspects about themselves and gaining a profound sense of self-awareness. Furthermore, inner exploration helps an individual to identify and release their limited feelings and negative patterns of thinking, which may be holding them back from attaining their full potential. It allows one to challenge the narratives they have constructed about themselves and the world, unfolding new possibilities and perspectives. By focusing on one's fears and insecurities, an individual can confront and overcome them, thereby making provisions for personal growth and transformation. This paper focuses on the life journeys of two protagonists Anuj and Neel from the novels *Everything I Never Told You* and *A Girl to Remember*, respectively, and explores how tremendous changes in their mind set helped them realise the ways towards inner exploration. Although the two stories move forward in different directions altogether, they seem to meet at a common point where the protagonists from both stories eventually experienced inner awakening even after they took diametrically different routes. Anuj is attempting to solve the riddle of his life, whereas Neel is not even aware that transformation is awaiting him. The present paper also attempts to explore the role of various female characters in bringing about the transformation and guiding the protagonists in their inner journey of finding the ultimate truth of their lives.

Keywords: Inner exploration, transformation, self-awareness

Introduction

Inner exploration is more than simply a trendy buzzword. It is a transformative and enlightening process that allows individuals to better understand who they are at core. The meaning of inner peace and its journey of attainment varies from person to person. However, numerous people spend their entire life in the quest of inner peace at holy places and spiritual retreats, in motivational books, and so on. Sometimes, people are so blinded by the rat race of the world that they forget that peace cannot be attained until they search for it within themselves. While meeting one's true self, individuals experience a zillion of negative

emotions, uneasiness, and self-doubt. Comprehending one's own emotions and thought patterns allows an individual to become more familiar to the needs and feelings of others. Because of this enhanced empathy, they tend to form deeper connections with people around them and navigate interpersonal relationships with greater ease and understanding. Additionally, inner exploration cultivates resilience and self-compassion, which enables individuals to face life's challenges with grace and kindness. The present paper discusses the psychological dilemma of Neel and Anuj from the novels *A Girl to Remember* and *Everything I never Told You*, respectively, and depicts the process of peeling the layers of the inner self. The journey of inner peace attainment of these two protagonists revolves on two distinct orbits, yet their odyssey connects them on the same level as they spend their lives before inner peace attainment in self-doubt and questioning and eventually moving towards self-discovery. Self-discovery provides them the answers of certain complicated questions that their lives throw towards them. In both the novels, the protagonists undertake a journey that transforms their lives, and in the process, they discover various dimensions of their new self.

Review of Literature

In his paper, "Inner Exploration in Ajay. K. Pandey's Novel A Girl to Remember", S. Ponmalar shares his views on inner exploration and the transformation of the protagonist on the basis of the theory of Carl Jung, a well-known psychoanalyst, and focuses on two aspects of the personality, that is, good and bad. In her paper, "Exploring the inner world of the female characters in Anita Desai and Nirupama Borgohain: A comparative study", Pranami Bania explores the inner world of the female characters in the selected works of Anita Desai and Nirupama Borgohain.

Discussion

Many Indian English writers have pursued the subject of inner journey and excelled in their writing. They have presented the journeys of their protagonists who cultivated a balanced world around themselves and cleared the conflicts within. Some journeys of life connect an individual to their real self. As quoted by Avatar Mahajan, "If one feels emptiness, inadequate, and unfulfilled inside, then any amount of external success will only magnify the inadequacy. Similarly, if one feels fulfilled in love and complete in the inner world, achieving external success will make them happier and more fulfilled" (Mahajan).

Modern Indian writers such as Preeti Shenoy, Durjoy Dutt, and Chetan Bhagat tell stories based on their personal experiences. They present what they observed and learned in the real world. They narrate their stories in the natural way of story-telling, which enables readers to connect with their stories. Ajay K. Pandey is an emerging Indian English writer who imparts life-changing messages in the guise of romance by writing enthralling stories and creating mesmerizing characters. His novels explore the depths of the human psyche, unravelling untold stories that lie within each individual. His stories serve as a powerful reminder that beneath the surface, everyone is carrying their hidden burdens and unexpressed emotions. Through his heartfelt writing and relatable characters, Pandey's works invite readers on a journey of inner exploration, challenging them to confront their unresolved feelings and experiences.

The novel *Everything I Never Told You* revolves around two best friends Roshan and Soha who want to be together, regardless of the fact that they belong to different religions. However, destiny has other plans for them. Because of this difference in religion, Roshan fails to convince his father to allow him to marry

Soha. So, as per his father's will, he marries Manisha in the hope of moving on. Nevertheless, destiny unfolds a twist for him when Manisha dies of cancer. This incident paves the way for Soha to walk back into Roshan's life. The present paper analyses the events from the perspective of Anuj, the son of Manisha and Roshan, and the constant struggle faced by Roshan because of his firm resolve to not lose Soha this time. In this novel, the story of Anuj starts with his inner embroilment over his father's relation with Soha, a Muslim girl after his mother's demise. He is jostled to see Soha at his house very often and feels betrayed by his father. In the words of Anuj, "I eventually started to understand everything that had been going on between my father and her ..." (*Everything I Never Told You* 25). Roshan's wish to marry Soha acts as adding oil to the cauldron of Anuj's wrath as he has always seen his father happily married to his mother. However, now, the thought of seeing his father with another woman infuriates him. When Roshan says, "I want to get married", Anuj gives a heart-piercing look with red eyes and a stiff face. He asks, "Are you asking for my consent or informing me?". He further says, "I know at this age my father wants to marry a Muslim woman." (*EINTY* 30)

Throughout his life, Anuj had categorised people on the basis of their religion. This is also one of the reasons for his extreme hatred for Soha. He could not bear even to be address as beta by her. Anuj requests Soha, "I have a small request Soha ji, if possible do not address me as beta. Call me Anuj". His aversion for Muslims is reflected in his conversation with his friend Gagan, "Can't you see why all terrorists are Muslims?... They do not respect other religions. According to them, there is only one religion, which they keep propagating by hook or by crook" (*EINTY* 28). When Anuj enquires his Aunt about his mother's relation with Soha, his agitation is intensified. With every revelation about his mother Manisha and her relation with Soha, his mother seems more like a mystery to him. With each passing day, things become complicated for him and amidst all the chaos, Anuj's efforts to compose himself and join the scattered pieces of his life seem futile.

Through Roshan's character, the author wants to prove that love cannot be confined within the walls of religious restrictions. Society as a whole does not seem to accept Roshan's and Soha's love. They both were aware of the religion-based bifurcation of people prevailing in Indian society. Soha says, "There are only religion and religious people, there is no God" (*EINTY* 82). Because of the strong walls of hatred that people draw in the name of religion, Roshan earnestly desires that his son should not be known as a Hindu or Muslim. He tells Manisha, "Let us not add a surname to his name ... He should not be known as a Hindu or a Muslim". (*EINTY* 88)

In the story, the letters play a crucial role in bringing out the transformation in Anuj's character. With the opening of each letter, which is supposedly written by his mother but is actually written by his father, Anuj is asked to hunt various religious places to complete the tasks assigned to him in the letter. Through the letters, he is first asked to visit a gurudwara and enquire about the collection of flowers after Guru Nanak ji's death. "Go to a gurudwara and ask who got the flowers after Guru Nanak ji's death?" (*EINTY* 93). When Anuj asks the question as mentioned in the letter, he comes to know about the shrines that were collectively built by Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims and not by Sikhs alone. Furthermore, he comes to know that Guru Nanak ji had asked his Hindu and Sikh devotees to place the flowers on his right side, while his Muslim devotees to place them on his left side. However, the next morning, only fresh flowers were

present, without any trace of the mortal body of Guru Nanak ji, which suggests that there is no scope of hatred for any religion.

In the second letter, Anuj is asked to ask for food from the vicinity of a masjid instead of purchasing it and to enquire about shahada and the reason for having one God alone. From this task, he comes to know that, “If God is the same, then we all are the same too” (EINTY 123). Moreover, he receives the message that food has no religion. Finally, through the last letter, Anuj is asked to enquire the reason of having so many Gods in Hinduism. The answer that he receives for this question shakes his belief completely. From electric baba, he comes to know, “There is only one absolute truth. Religion is man-made”. (EINTY 169). Eventually, he understands that it is useless to contemplate about the differences in religion.

From categorically rejecting Soha at the place of his mother to the point of accepting her and allowing her to become a part of their family, Anuj undergoes tremendous pain and turmoil. In this process, his more amiable new self emerges that understands the superficiality of religion and considers humanity as the supreme religion. Through this novel, the author mainly affirms that love flows naturally and should not be bonded by any religious restrictions. The author, however, does not undermine the value of religion but shares a new outlook of religion that does not promote hatred and conflict on its name rather discards them altogether. Through this father–son relationship, the author attempts to illuminate the dark cavern of our mind and make us aware of the shallowness that we present in the name of faith.

Thus, the present paper records the change that occurs in Anuj’s perspective, outlook, and philosophy towards religion and love. Anuj’s aversion for Soha metamorphoses into his request to her for not leaving the country and staying with them as a family. With the reconstruction of his new self, Anuj’s surrounding also changes. He observes that having a true knowledge of religion shapes and unites people, whereas a distorted understanding can ruin people’s lives. The novel ends on a heart melting hug between Soha and Anuj where motherly affection seems to flow instead of any malice or hatred.

The next novel, *A Girl to Remember* revolves around the main character Neel who seems to be entranced with the physical beauty of women. In this novel, the author deals with the sexual desires of Neel, who is a slave to his body and ignores the voice of his conscience. Some women characters in Neel’s life act as a guide and help him sail in the boat that leads him towards the transformation and a better life. Moreover, the novel talks about an innocent and mysterious girl who is eager to meet an angel in her life who she thinks will make her life beautiful. The story takes a turn when she encounters Neel who has to undertake a journey of transformation to become that angel in her life.

When we dive deep into the life of Neel, we come to know that his problem of being a womanizer is engrained in his childhood. At the young age of 8 years, he started fancying women’s legs. He admits that, “Watching school girls passing by in their varied length skirts gave me a strange satisfaction. I always watched their legs. They were all beautiful, differently. Some were extra exposed, some exceptionally fair, and some used to be hidden too much by their extra-long skirts. I don’t know why, but those legs always caught my attention” (*A Girl to Remember* 52). His mother shares that unlike most boys of his age, Neel was fascinated with soft toys, Barbie dolls, or a doll house instead of a bicycle, racing cars, and other toys. Furthermore, he had to experience a lot of psychological pressure when against his will, he had to opt for

Mathematics instead of Biology because of his father's insistence. To worsen matters further, he befriends wrong company and develops the habit of smoking and consuming drugs during his graduation years. Neel himself observes this moral deterioration of his character by saying, "I did not notice any other body parts. Only the long and beautiful legs, which were extra exposed with the short dress. Those legs in high heels were all over my mind. I imagined them walking in the house" (GR 68). Even his mother undergoes a lot of mental turbulence while seeing him falling into the trench of immorality from where there seems no way back. She comments, "He only thought of women as bodies and their existence for him was solely to satisfy men's need" (GR 84). She attempts to change his mind by asking certain questions to understand the root cause of his behaviour and thereby fix it, but fails miserably every time.

Neel's mother serves more like a comfort zone for him where he could reveal the hideous cavern of his mind. Once while they were discussing an incident where a cab driver misbehaves with a woman, Neel reprimands himself for defending the guilty and not understanding things from the victim's perspective. Understanding his mental plight, his mother shares a stupendous advice that can actually alter the view of many such people who consider women as only a body. She says, "A woman is a mother, a sister, a friend, a daughter to someone. You can understand these relationships better when you become a father or a husband. A relationship is the mother of all feelings. You will realize that she is not just a body, she is much more than that". (GR 77)

His interaction with Ananya, his student, makes his life a living hell. Because of her, he has to bear the brunt of everyone's sceptical eyes. Under the pretext of solving Mathematics problems, Ananya starts visiting Neel's room and eventually turns the wheel of the conversations towards obscenity through hints. Although Neel never forces himself on her or any other girl for that matter, he just imagines them naked in his mind and doing and saying things that his senses find bliss in. Furthermore, Neel never crosses his boundaries of being a teacher with Ananya, but rumours spread by staff members and students stigmatise his character. He says, "Honestly, I was not a saint. In fact, I saw myself more as a demon, if anything I have indulged in a lot of relationships, mostly no strings attached, but never with my students" (GR 2). Neel acknowledges to be a demon, but, at the same time, he clearly knows that he can never have relationships with his students. He contemplates, "I was on my guard, very sure that she was my student and too young to know what this could lead to" (GR 38). This false rumour finally leads Neel towards his resignation at the DAV campus. Eventually, Pihu, another student of Neel, helps him in getting an accommodation in her house. Thus, Neel meets Pihu who ultimately brings revolutionary changes in his character.

Sometimes, a catalyst is required for inner transformation in a person, and in the case of Neel, Pihu acts as that catalyst triggering his journey of awakening. His life takes a U-turn when Pihu enters his life, although she does not fit in his stereotypical image of a girl. Neel, who is quite fascinated about naked legs, is dejected to see Pihu's legs that had no curvy appeal. They seemed more like a bamboo stick to him. He reflects, "Her bamboo thin, unattractive legs failed to draw my attention. I silently thanked the heaven above for making her so average looking" (GR 43). At Pihu's house, he meets his mother Annu who has lost her husband to a genetic disorder and now lives with her 17-year-old daughter Pihu. The author acquaints the readers of Neel's negative mental state when he finally gets an accommodation at Pihu's house even after facing a lot of trouble and backlash. Neel thinks, "A house with two females and

a male tenant. The perfect plot for an erotic movie” (GR 24). Neel now always attempts to have a good rapport with Pihu so as to develop an intimacy with her mother. When Pihu asks Neel for his opinion on his mother, he often suppresses his inner demons and replies, “Your mom is very helpful and efficient, Pihu. Manage things quite commendably, I replied out loud, putting the demon in my head to rest” (GR 24). At this instance in his life, Neel realises that awakening the demon inside him could lead to internal as well as external damage. Therefore, Neel decides to take a step ahead towards positive thoughts, which then leads to his inner transformation. He then starts considering women more than mere flesh and blood.

Neel’s first interaction with Pihu was more like his first step towards his inner transformation, which he was hitherto unaware of. His first analysis of Pihu was another instance of how he generally analyses women, “She was wearing the school uniform. The short skirt ended just above her knees . . . she looked like a regular girl, nothing remarkable in her appearance” (GR 5). Initially, Neel is rather irritated at her visage, since she does not fit in his category of attractive women. Nevertheless, he gradually realises the purity of her love for him as she considers him as a father figure. With this, he begins to change internally, as reflected through his thoughts, “Pihu was the one who offered me shelter when I was thrown out and had nowhere to go. She was really trying to help. Before I could forgive her and ask for forgiveness for being rude” (GR 133). To pacify Pihu at her father’s demise when she was too young, her mother Annu had narrated an illogical story of an angel and a demon, wherein Annu described that a demon took her father away. So, young Pihu presupposes that, one day, an angel will come and change everything in her life. Annu informs Neel that for Pihu, “. . . You are her angel” (GR 137). In addition, Pihu presents a card to Neel sharing her feelings, “Hi sir, because of you, I believe in angel . . . Happy Father’s Day” (GR 177). This is one of the major moments of inner transformation in Neel’s character. For the first time, he hears the voice of an angel inside him, “There was something about the eyes that I was uncomfortable with. Since my hands remained immovable, frozen, I could not reach for the eyes and see a couple more drops continued, wetting my cheeks, making way to my dry lips” (GR 179). His inner transformation is reflected through his words, “I went to see Pihu. She was in her bed. One leg out of the blanket. I saw a naked leg, and my gaze did not falter. I sat on Pihu’s bed, close to her. I had no hesitation. There was no testosterone, no adrenalin rush, and no hormonal imbalance” (GR 184). Neel quotes, “She was no ordinary girl, but a girl for some higher purpose. She was born to teach me an important lesson—A woman is far more than just a body”. (GR 209)

Conclusion

Throughout the story, readers witness the characters’ emotional journey as they wrestle with their pasts, navigate their present circumstances, and attempt to build the foundation of a better future. Both novels exhibit the themes of love, loss, and resilience and the transforming power of human connections. The present paper portrays the personal journey of two individuals towards self-discovery, healing, and growth. Both these heart-warming and emotional stories showcase the journey of inner transformation, emotional conflicts, and complexities of life.

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